

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY #2
FOCUS ON: GEN. U.S. GRANT'S CITY POINT HEADQUARTERS,
PETERSBURG NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD

With "**Letters Home**" students become Civil War soldiers and write their own letters home.

Procedure: Students may work cooperatively (groups of 3-4) or individually on this activity. Students will read the following four excerpts from Civil War soldiers' letters and diary entries. Then they will complete the following two activities:

Activity A:

Students will answer the discussion questions following each excerpt, as a group or individually. The discussion questions are designed for students to reflect on the passages they have just read.

Activity B:

Using their imaginations and the examples they have read, each student then will write his/her own letter home to a relative or friend as if he/she was a soldier serving during the Civil War. Students should describe what it has been like to spend the last 5-6 months "living on the lines" in Petersburg. As a follow-up class activity, have students read their letters aloud.

Excerpt #1

In the trenches near Petersburg – July 6th 1864

Dear Wife Maggie,

"Yesterday evening just before coming into the trenches I received your letter of the 30th June. I had become a little impatient as it was almost a week between times and letters from home are always waited for anxiously....

Well this is the 22nd day of our operations before Petersburg. It's 3 days in the trenches and tow out, with us, and the out is not much better than the in for we do not move so far to the rear but that the rebs can shell us. I am just as thin as a rail (just the condition for this country) yet in good health and strong as ever I was. I will not be so liable to fevers, or to fatal results severely wounded as if I was fleshy, so that I am very well satisfied with my physical condition. You would be certainly diverted to see me now. I occupy a hole in the ground just long enough for one to lie down in and high enough to set up in, covered with poles and two or three feet of earth to form a protection from pieces of shell. I cannot see that we are gaining much advantage but I suppose Mr. Grant knows what he is about. (*Except from a letter from J.J. Scroggs Diary and Letters (1852-1865), compiled by Larry Leigh.*)

Discussion Questions:

1. Who is Scroggs referring to when he uses the term "rebs?" What does he mean when he talks about the 'rebs shelling us?'
2. Why do you think Scroggs must stay in a hole to protect him from the 'pieces of shell?' Where do you imagine he is fighting?
3. Why might Scroggs be 'as thin as a rail?' Why does he see this condition as advantageous?

Excerpt #2

Letter From a Maine Soldier:

Camp near Petersburg, VA. – July 31st, 1864

"We had the saddest day yesterday I ever saw. We were called up at half past two o'clock, A.M., and formed in line of battle at three. We filed our left in front and marched down to within three hundred yards of the rebel fort we had mined, and halted in a deep railroad cut until the explosion took place, which was terrific. There was six tons of powder buried thirty feet under the ground, directly under the fort, which exploded at half past four A.M., when we started for the rebels and went directly into the remains of the fort. At the moment the fort blew up we had fifty pieces of artillery open on them directly over us. The air was so thick that I could not see three feet ahead. The ruins of the fort I cannot describe; my heart sickens at the thought. The huge masses of earth, thrown almost to the way from six to ten rods, were thrown almost to our lines, or from the fort twenty or thirty rods; and many of them were buried alive, cannon and gun-carriages thrown in all directions, together with the same. Inside, where those two regiments met their fate, baffles description. The rebels opened on us, right and left, as soon as they could gather their senses. Our brigade made the charge, so that we were some of the first ones in the fort. Many a poor fellow gave up his life for it was a perfect torrent of shot and shell. Going over the parapet we found a hole in the earth about thirty feet deep, large enough to hold from four to six thousand men, packed full of our men, perfectly safe. The men knew it was almost certain death to get upon the parapet, but soon Col. Wentworth, with a few others, went ahead, and our brigade followed. There is where the Colonel got his wound. When we got in, our regiment was one of the first, there were but two colors I saw planted there, the 31st and 32nd Maine. We could find no one to hold the colors, so Lieut. Chase mounted the fort and held the colors when no other would; but brave almost rashness, after daring to leave the flag without holding it, he called for the men to load their guns and pass them to him, and he would stand and take deliberate aim. He continued to fire as long as it was of any use, and then stepped back into the fort, and was soon shot in the head. The first thing he said was, "Take me to Capt. Hammond." They called me to him, and he would not consent for me to leave him for he thought he should die; and we all thought he would, for he bled very badly. There was every probability that we should all be killed if we left the pit, but we soon started with him, myself, the Orderly Sergeant, and one from another company. It was so hot we were almost exhausted, as we had to carry him stooping so we should not get our heads shot off; we got almost to our lines before we got any help. When we got him to the ambulance I broke down and could not stand." (*Excerpt from one soldier's recollection of the Battle of the Crater at Petersburg.*)

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you believe has caused the 'masses of earth to be thrown,' and 'many to be buried alive' in this excerpt?

2. The passage, 'We could find no one to hold the colors,' refers to the regimental flags. Why is there such an emphasis placed on who will hold the colors?

3. What you think the colors mean to the men fighting on the field, and how do the colors aid the men in battle?

Excerpt #3

Diary of a Third Michigan Volunteer Infantry
Color Sergeant, D.G. Crotty:

"The siege goes bravely on. The two armies keep digging away under each other's guns. The hardships to be endured are very great, but all now have schooled themselves down so that they are met as a matter of course. We do not pretend to say how long we will have a rest, nor do we care much, for we are so used to hardships that almost everything is done without a murmur. Of course, when we have a chance we enjoy ourselves as best we can. A soldier loves music and listens to the strains of the beautiful military bands, of which we have plenty in our army, and boast of the best bands in the country. Sometimes we have a dance under the shining moon, and a looker on would think that trouble or hardships were unknown to the jolly soldiers, who are hoeing down with their Government pontoons on the green sward. Oh, those beautiful nights in old Virginia, I look back to with great gladness, and think of the jolly, as well as the hard times we used to have.

Our military railroad must not be forgotten. It runs along the rear of our camps to City Point, where we get all of our supplies. The train, as it thunders along, is in plain sight of the rebels, and once in a while they waste some ammunition by firing at it, but they never hit anything to do any harm. We get passes quite often to go to City Point, a place now made up of the most motley crowd that ever congregated in one place. All come to this place for the one purpose of getting all the money they can from the soldiers. They care only for their hard-earned money, but not a straw for them..." *(from the book: Four Years Campaigning in the Army of the Potomac.)*

Discussion Questions:

1. Why was the military railroad important to the soldiers fighting near Petersburg?
What was the town of City Point like?

2. Why do you think it was important, even during a time of war, for the soldiers to listen to and play music, dance, and be 'jolly soldiers'?

Excerpt #4

(The writer of this letter – Lieut. Richard Lewis – was a mere boy when he entered the Confederate service, as a member of the Fourth Regiment South Carolina Volunteers, where he served during the first year of the war. This is a letter he wrote home to his mother.)

Bivouac Near Petersburg – September 18, 1864

"The boys are all very diligently engaged throwing up fortifications in the front, being gone every day from 6 o'clock until about two or three, and will soon have the noble and brave city almost impregnable, though the stout hearts around it are almost strong enough to bulwark. The troops are all very enthusiastic and confident of their ability to whip Grant. They seem to be anxious that the trying and arduous campaign should be decided, and, I believe, the final issue of it will come to a close in a very short time, as Grant has got back from the valley and is receiving heavy reinforcements. General Longstreet is again in the saddle, and I am in hopes will soon be the terror of Yankeedom. He has not, according to our bright anticipations, resumed the command of his old corps. There is an impression that he will go to retrieve the lost fortunes of Early in the valley. We are all bountifully supplied with rations, better, I believe than we have been for the last twelve months – feasting lately on some of the fine beeves. Hampton drove in from Grant's range in Southwestern Virginia. I am not able to carry my hand without support as yet, and am sorry to say have been suffering some inconvenience from it. I have been offered a furlough by my Colonel, and am advised by my surgeons to go home, but I am going to stay and share the campaign for weal or woe with the boys." (*Excerpt from Camp Life of a Confederate Boy, Bratton's Brigade, Longstreet's Corps, C.S.A.*)

Discussion Questions:

1. What does Lewis mean when he says 'the boys are throwing up fortifications?'

What is Lewis implying in his letter, just after he claims that the 'troops are enthusiastic of their ability to whip Grant?' Do you think he really feels that they can 'whip Grant?'